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SUBJECT: DONOR COUNTRIES COALESCE ON BHUTANESE REFUGEE
STRATEGY

11. (U) SUMMARY: On June 1, 2006, seven members of the Core Group on Bhutanese Refugees, the UNHCR and the European Commission met in The Hague to set a near-term strategy to break the impasse in resolving the 16-year-old Bhutan refugee problem. Representatives agreed to lobby both Nepal (to take the initial steps of registering camp residents and allowing the most vulnerable cases to resettle to third countries) and Bhutan (to make good on the pledge to enable the voluntary return of Category One and Four refugees to Bhutan). Participants asked the USG to give India a read-out of the results of the meeting and supported USG plans to provide a joint briefing to Nepal, Bhutan, and India in New York in July. Additional strategies were also discussed, including a special envoy, linking development aid to progress on resolution of the refugee problem, and resettlement of Bhutanese refugees in third countries.
END SUMMARY.

12. (U) The Netherlands hosted a meeting on June 1, 2006, of members of the Core Group on Bhutanese Refugees to discuss the current impasse in resolving the Bhutan refugee issue. In addition to the Netherlands, representatives from Australia, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, the United States, and UNHCR attended. The European Commission, though not a Core Group member, also participated. PRM/ANE Deputy Director Lawrence Bartlett and poloff represented the United States.

RESETTLE REFUGEES BUT DO NOT LINK DEVELOPMENT AID TO PROGRESS

13. (SBU) Core Group members shared information on their ability to accept Bhutanese refugees for voluntary resettlement in their countries. The USG and Canadian offers, 50,000 and 5,000 respectively - each over a multi-year period - far outstrip those of all other members combined, who offered to absorb refugees in the hundreds. In discussing the immediate needs of extremely vulnerable refugees, who may have been subjected to violence or are single female-headed families, most countries agreed their resettlement programs could accept refugees immediately. The USG, Canada, and UNHCR shared their recent unsuccessful experiences in trying to get 16 urgent cases out of Nepal as evidence that firm resettlement offers to a small group of refugees have not been sufficient to persuade the Nepalese government to issue exit permits. The USG noted the urgency of using resettlement as a tool in negotiations, since Maoist influence in the camps, should it increase, might prevent refugees from

passing security screening required for third country resettlement.

¶4. (U) Members also shared information on their development budgets in Nepal and Bhutan, with all noting an unwillingness to withhold or decrease development program funding to either country to leverage a resolution of the refugee issue. Denmark, Norway, New Zealand, and the European Commission all suggested using assistance as a carrot to encourage the two parties to resolve the situation satisfactorily.

FIRST STEPS FIRST, THEN PUSH FOR A COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTION

¶5. (SBU) Denmark opened discussion on the way forward by asking that a comprehensive solution be orchestrated to resolve the status of the over 100,000 refugees before pushing for immediate action by either Nepal or Bhutan. The USG, supported by Canada, pushed back, noting that getting Nepal and Bhutan to take smaller, first steps might better pave the way for an eventual comprehensive solution: Nepal should allow a smaller number of extremely vulnerable refugees (up to the 7,500 UNHCR had previously identified) to resettle to third countries and should allow UNHCR to register camp residents (or conduct a "census" of the camp population) to ascertain population numbers and the interest of refugees in returning to Bhutan; Bhutan must make good on its promise to allow Categories One and Four refugees from Khundunabari Camp to voluntarily return to Bhutan after offering detailed information about the terms and conditions that would face returning refugees and commencing a voluntary return program.

¶6. (SBU) Other countries, eventually including Denmark, agreed to this approach. Australia reiterated an agreement made at the previous meeting that Core Group countries demarche Nepal and Bhutan with a common message, emphasizing that these initial steps begin immediately and detailing how Core Group countries might assist. The USG plans to again deliver its message in advance of the planned July 14 briefing with Nepal, Bhutan, and India (see para 9) and will ask that other countries do the same.

¶7. (SBU) The Netherlands raised the issue of appointing a special envoy to facilitate communication between Core Group countries and Nepal and Bhutan. Core Group members expressed only mild interest in the suggestion, noting that the mandate of the position would first need to be known before they could confirm interest. The USG noted we would consider the value of such a position. The Netherlands agreed to draft a short job description for others to consider at the June 22-23, 2006, Annual Tripartite Consultation (ATC) meeting in Geneva. Members did not raise any possible candidates for such a position.

MAKING INDIA A FULL PARTNER, FOLLOWING UP WITH NEPAL, BHUTAN

¶8. (SBU) Canada suggested that the USG, as the most influential Core Group member, brief India on the outcomes of the Hague meeting and invite them to become a full partner of the group. All participants agreed. Members suggested that the USG provide this briefing in Delhi and report back at the June ATC meeting. The Department will convey points to Embassy Delhi via septel.

¶9. (SBU) The USG tabled a proposal to conduct a joint meeting with Nepal, Bhutan, India and a small group of Core Group countries in New York in July. The purpose of the meeting would be to receive information from both Nepal and Bhutan on their bi-lateral process and reiterate USG and Core Group interest in both countries taking the first steps noted above in advance of a more comprehensive solution. The

date of this briefing, if accepted by invitees, is tentatively set for July 14. Participants agreed to the USG initiative and asked that only two Core Group members join the USG in the meeting, in part to deliver a united message but not overwhelm Nepal and India with a larger group. The USG offered to share talking points for the meeting with Core Group members and feed their points, if acceptable, into the meeting. The USG would envision following up in the region with additional demarches from Kathmandu and Delhi and is considering a mission to the region by PRM Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey.

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